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ABSTRACT

An observational study of school principals confirms findings from earlier Australian and U.S. studies that emphasized the brevity, variety, and fragmentation of principals' work. Three secondary school principals in Victoria (Australia)--one in a public school and two in private schools--were observed for three weeks each. The study found that the principal's job is characterized chiefly by uncertainty, variety, brevity, discontinuity, and "invisibility." The three principals worked long hours, used a range of communication media, spent most of their time in interpersonal contacts, frequently changed location from preceding activities, often worked unseen by other school staff (and hence "invisible" to them), suffered frequent interruptions, and spent much of their time involved in affairs external to the school, often with nonsubordinates. The author concludes that principals' work should not be too tightly scheduled, since the core of the job involves organizational communication through interpersonal contacts, and that principals should have skills in handling uncertainty. (RW)

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THE AUSTRALIAN ADMINISTRATOR

A Professional Publication for Educational Administrators

SCHOOL OF EDUCATION, DEAKIN UNIVERSITY

Published bi-monthly, February to December

EDITOR: Dr. W. J. Smyth

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Mr. Willis has chosen to research and write on a topic well overdue in Australia – the work patterns of principals! While descriptive research of this kind may not provide us with all the answers, it certainly moves us in the direction of reaching a better understanding of the dilemmas that plague principals. (Ed.)

UNCERTAINTY AS A FACT OF LIFE (AND WORK) FOR THE SCHOOL PRINCIPAL.

Quentin F. Willis

INTRODUCTION

> *In textbooks and journals in educational administration, the principal has been viewed from every possible angle. He has been well and truly classified and filed. There are many labels from which to choose – initiator, co-ordinator, evaluator, communicator, organisational analyst, change agent, administrative mechanic. Each label says something about the principal; very rarely, however, do we meet the whole man in the textbook descriptions. (Ward, 1975, p. 12)*

Ironically, despite so much focus on the principalship, especially the enduring quest for the "role of the principal", there is little evidence available to show what actually is the nature of the principal's job.

The irony is perhaps tragic when one considers the severity of the debate over the relevance of education in the 1970's and 1980's, the criticisms from business firms demanding educational value in the workforce in return for tax payments to government, the increasing assertiveness of a "community" pressing for more involvement in what goes on in schools and the defensiveness of teacher unions in a shrinking education industry. At the receiving end of all these pressures is the school principal.

Accordingly, there would seem to be a need to identify the content and characteristics of the principal's work for, with the number of programmes in educational administration directed heavily at preparing people for the principalship, there is so little documented evidence about the work done by those who hold that position.

In his observational study of five top managers in the United States, Mintzberg (1973) found a similar situation, with stoic loyalty to Henri Fayol's maxims of 1916, that managers "plan", "organise", "co-ordinate" and "control", serving to raise managerial work to the realms of organisational mythology. Also Mintzberg noted the studies, ranging back to the era of Scientific Management, that scrutinised the work of operatives and other subordinates but virtually ignored what managers actually did on the job.

Teachers have been subjected to schemes of classroom observation but what about principals? In Australia, O'Dempsey (1976) pioneered research into the actual work of school principals. Like Mintzberg, he observed three Queensland high school principals for one week each and closely recorded their work. O'Dempsey had clearly been influenced by Mintzberg's study and he endorsed the latter's findings that managerial work was characterised by brevity, variety and fragmentation. O'Dempsey added that:

> *In brief, principals appear unconsciously to look on their schools as large classrooms and, in doing so, they gravitate to the active or problem areas, proceeding incrementally and handling things as they arise. Accustomed to a densely populated verbal environment, they are perhaps like the leopard in not being easily able to change their "spots". (O'Dempsey, 1976, p.203)*

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A similar project to O'Dempsey's is under way at the University of New England with the focus on primary school principals in N.S.W.

This paper, however, reports some of the findings of an observational study in Victoria when the principals of a State high school, an independent college and a Catholic college were observed continuously for three weeks each (Willis, 1980). A particular feature of the principals' work was the dimension of uncertainty.

THE PRINCIPAL AND RESEARCH

Perhaps the most elusive "role" of the school principal is that of "educational leader". With so many studies of "leadership" and yet still no consensus about its meaning or precision about its definition, this paper will dodge such a slippery concept and concentrate on the principal as head of an organisation. Smyth's (1980) first edition of this publication paved the way for such debate.

Thompson (1967) presented a typology of technologies to explain the work that goes on in all types of organisations. His identification of an *intensive technology* can be seen as including the work of managers and administrators in running an organisation. The intensive technology embraces work that involves a number of activities, processes and techniques, with feedback necessary from the "object" of the work. It is characterised by its "custom" or special and individual nature. This is illustrated in the performance of a surgical operation, in teaching a class of students, or in the principal's conversation with a visitor in the office. By its very nature, such a form of work contains a high level of uncertainty heightened by the multivariate context of work organisation and the organisation's interdependence with a dynamic external environment.

Uncertainty seemed to pervade the work activity of the three principals observed in the present study. Apart from an average total weekly workload of 59.9 hours (including an average 22.6 hours per week during the evenings and at weekends), the principals carried out their work over a range of media, such as inter-personal contacts, desk work, formal meetings, telephone calls and tours of the school. Also, 12.8 percent of the work during the school day was spent on business away from the school. Distinctive features, however, were the variety, brevity, discontinuity and "invisibility" of much of their work.

The principals had little break from the pace of their work except in the variety of the work itself. A tour of the school was a "rest" from conversations in the office, both personally and on the phone; a telephone call was a "break" from a segment of desk work; a staff meeting was a "change" from a battery of visits and phone calls in the office.

Some 75.4 percent of the principals' work time was spent in contacts with other people, with the consequent complexity of human interaction, the often unpredictable purpose of the business in hand, personality moods and even the location. In all, 36.8 percent of their activities marked a change of place from the preceding work activity. It was apparent that, despite prolonged sessions in the office, the principals frequently shifted among various places — staffrooms, other people's offices, specialist rooms, the school grounds and even away from the school — in their restless search for information or perhaps because of their impulsion to get things done.

The interpersonal nature of their work was highlighted by the amount of time spent in contact with just one other person. This was a composite 37.1 percent of their time during the day and, whether the activity was formal or purely social, the intensity of such human interaction called for close and active involvement on the principals' part. The variety of such encounters meant that much of what might happen next in the principals' day was a continuous open question. Further, the principals' activities could alternate between internal school business concerning staff or students and external affairs. The overall impression given was that the principal was beginning, in the middle of, and ending numerous issues concurrently, some dormant but any of them likely to resurge in their demand for attention.

A further uncertainty lay in the brevity of work activities. It was found that 83.2 percent of the principals' activities lasted ten minutes or less, 67 percent lasted five minutes or less and only 1.1 percent extended beyond one hour. Moreover, activities lasting approximately half a minute were 7.5 percent of the total. The indeterminate nature of their work showed in the lack of precision for the duration and outcome of any work activity. For the principal there was very little of the surety associated with, say, an undisturbed forty-five minute unit of classroom teaching.

Further, 21.1 percent of the principals' work activities were interrupted in some fashion. Moreover 25.9 percent of these interrupted activities were not resumed. Even though the principals might try to control some portion of their day by scheduling activities, they were still subject to the events initiated by other people (for 26.8 percent of their work during the school day), by regularly scheduled occurrences, such as meetings and assemblies (18.7 percent) and their own, impromptu decisions to respond to the unexpected demands of the job (15.7 percent). Consequently, the principals were seen to initiate planned activities for only 36.8 percent of their worktime at school.

Probably, the principals could have delegated some matters to other people and, on occasions, they did so but they mainly seemed to savour the contact with live action and accepted the occurrence of the unexpected as a condition of the job. The realities of organisational life meant that much of what occurred in a school involving the principal, could not be planned or scheduled.

While a property of intensive technology is the feedback from the "object" of the work, it was noted that the principal's job was essentially a thankless one. So often did they congratulate or thank other people and so rarely was this reciprocated. It was virtually a one-way process, with the principals denied any reward feedback about their performance as they functioned in a context of uncertainty. Also, much of their work performance was "invisible" or unseen by others in the school. A total 59.8 percent of their complete load was work done alone in the office or on business away from the school or in "after-hours" time. It is no doubt true that few people in a school have clear knowledge of what the principal actually does or any understanding of the principal's job, except sometimes to see him arriving at school "late" or leaving "early" or "wandering" around the buildings and grounds.

IMPLICATIONS FOR THE PRINCIPALSHIP

While educational sociologists have argued that the school must be open to the "community", it is a fact of modern life that schools are having to take more heed of their external environment and appraise their relevance to that environment. The principal will increasingly be the nexus between the school organisation and the setting within which it must operate.

In the present study, 34.4 percent of the principals' work during the school day was devoted to external affairs – contacts with the Education Department, local government bodies, educational consultants, parents, the bank manager, suppliers of equipment and so on. Moreover, 28.2 percent of their time was spent with *non-subordinates*. The significance of this use of time lies in the popularity of leadership models that concern only the "leader" and the "followers" in the work group.

The principalship demands high levels of interpersonal competence in its incumbents; a capacity to relate effectively not only with their staff and students but with those people with whom the school must function, yet who are not subordinate to the principal. Moreover, such people belong not only to formal or official governing agencies of the school but also to the widening circle of those who seek to regulate the performance and objective-setting of schools. Further, such people will increasingly demand more visible assessment of the productivity of schools.

The pressures from an external environment represent a higher degree of uncertainty for the principal. The problems and expectations from that source are less programmable and less prone to the convenience of precedent than the relatively familiar arena of the school's internal operations.

Coupled with this growing external orientation in the job of the principal is the need to maintain an overview of the school, both over its internal business and its external relationships. Increasingly, the need to delegate authority to lower level administrators for supervision of segments of the school's activities will simultaneously free the principal from these tasks, and thus burden him/her with added accountability for the work performance of others in the school, such as form co-ordinators. In order that this global overview of the school be effective, the principal's communication networks will multiply in importance, complexity and the sheer time necessary for them to be broadcast. There can only be an increase in telephone calls, personal interactions and meetings and in the principal's general availability and accessibility to other people.

In addition to the need for being an articulate spokesman for the organisation, the principal is faced with the problem of superficiality as a work condition. Peterson (1978) referred to "decision-press", resulting from the immediacy and variability of tasks facing the principal, as an important characteristic of the principal's work. The job might call for abundant social intercourse but much of this will be inhibited. The sheer pressure of events and commitments, the range and variety of activities, the frequency of interruptions and the simple matter of the unexpected being ever-present, all contribute to the short-lived, lack of in-depth experience in much of the principal's work. Mintzberg (1973) referred to this as the manager's "proficient superficiality".

THE MANAGEMENT OF TIME (OR THE CULT OF EFFICIENCY?)

> *When the principal plans a definite schedule of his activities, he takes the necessary step of resolving his philosophy of the principalship into a working program of professional service. In taking time to plan and organise his work, he meets various important responsibilities assigned to him. (Kyte, 1941, p. 78)*

One senses that Kyte's advice has an air of unreality for the school principal of the 1980's. With the principal's work seen as a custom technology, where virtually each activity is unique, there is a constant demand on the principal's personal resources. Standardisation of one's performance is not appropriate in this kind of work, so how then can the principal manage his time?

Various training programmes may preach principles of large-scale delegation (and even off-loading responsibilities!), encourage certain attitudes to both the telephone and the unexpected visitor at the office and construct tactics for arranging priorities, keeping faith with one's diary and rehearsing a secretary in buffering techniques but . . . at a cost.

A work day totally scheduled and initiated by the principal means severe limits on the flow of current or "hot" information and a stifling of interpersonal contacts. These elements – information and relationships – are the essence of organisational communication and the core of the principal's work.

Uncertainty is a fact of life for the principal because of his organisational role. Skills in handling uncertainty are not as feasible as the enriching of people's personal resources for managing the principalship, such as the ability and preparedness to

empathise with other people, sensitising to the operation and effects of status systems and an understanding of the frames of reference held about the school. As expressed by Grassie:

> *It is likely that the principal will see a decision he must make in relation to the needs of the school as a whole and its place in the system, whereas the teacher will perceive it from the point of view of its possible effects on his work in the classroom. (Grassie, 1972, p. 6)*

In the present study, the principals spent 5.3 percent of their time during the school day just being "visible" in the staff or common room. Here they were available to the staff in a more casual manner than in the formalised context of the office. During such appearances the principals were never left alone. If they had nothing particular to raise with any member of staff on that occasion, then the reverse never seemed to apply. They were constantly approached by various members of staff or perhaps the principal may have initially singled out someone – often a senior member of staff or a specialist, such as the librarian or the careers adviser – and this started a chain of interactions. It seemed more customary for one person at a time to talk with the principal, indicating the immediate and valuable nature of this experience both for the principal and the staff.

Can such time be managed? Should such informal visits to the common room be omitted in order to keep the principal's diary clear for scheduled engagements? What *are* the "time-wasters" in the principal's day? Is there to be a return to the cult of efficiency in education (Callahan, 1962)?

Undoubtedly the chief executive of a complex organisation such as a school will need some degree of control of his or her day, but there is a need also for a balance between being a slave to the diary and being carried along by the flow of daily events. The principal may plan some of his day but effective management of his time will show also in his trying to avoid "blocking in" the whole day and in being prepared to meet with activities that are both unscheduled and initiated by other people. The inevitability of uncertainty in the school principal's organisational work largely obviates the careful planning of the day. So much of the principal's work is current and topical and associated with the "here and now".

However, the greatest potential cost arising from this accommodation to uncertainty is the response of others in the school especially classroom teachers, whose daily routine is tightly circumscribed by the "certainty" of the timetable and who may be unable or unwilling to accept the apparent "ease" of the principal's more flexible working day. The gulf between the global, managerial-administrative perspective of the principal and the necessarily narrow, segmental concern of the teacher is possibly the saddest fact of organisational life for the school principal.

CONCLUSION

The principal's day will generally be hectic in pace, varied in its composition, discontinuous and superficial in any pursuit of tasks, with the unexpected always as one of the few certainties of the job. For both personal survival and effectiveness as head of an educational organisation, the principal must cope with such an array of ambiguity, frustration and disruption. That is both the nature and the price of the job.

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